Fairbury's Historic Murals Popular with Citizens and Visitors

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Back in 2015, Aldermen Terry Zimmerman and David Slagel formed the Fairbury Improvement Group. The mission of this group was to improve the quality of life for current residents, maintain the population, and attract more visitors to shop, dine, and enjoy Fairbury's recreational activities.

One of the improvement ideas generated by the group was to make Fairbury's rich history "come to life" through historical murals. A study was performed to determine how other communities display their murals. Pontiac had the Wall Dogs paint their murals onto buildings. These Pontiac murals required a lot of wall space and were relatively expensive. There was also a five year waiting period to schedule the Wall Dogs for a project.

In towns on a river, like Cincinnati, Ohio, and Maysville, Kentucky, murals are painted onto their concrete floodwalls. In both of these towns, their murals are very popular with both current residents and visitors.

Fairbury does not have any concrete floodwalls, so that was not an option. The idea was then generated to have five historic murals displayed on a wood support structure in Veteran's Memorial Park. The wood would be pressure-treated to increase the longevity and painted to match the yellow trim color of old City Hall.

The next question was what five areas of Fairbury history were to be displayed. It was determined the five topics would be the railroad, coal mining, Francis Townsend, the Fairbury Fair, and John Virgin's Horse Palace.

Another difficult decision was how to apply the artwork to the murals. One option was to have local artists hand draw each panel. Another option was to obtain or create high-resolution artwork that could be digitally printed onto the large murals. The best option was to find or create high-resolution artwork and digitally publish the illustrations.

A historical search was done for information about the Peoria & Oquawka Railroad that founded Fairbury back in 1857. This railroad was later renamed the TP&W. In the 1993 video, ***The Toledo, Peoria, and Western***, one clip showed the first steam locomotive purchased by the Peoria & Oquawka Railroad. Latham & Co. in Vermont manufactured this first locomotive. An internet search found a scale drawing of their engine.

Unfortunately, the scale drawing of the steam locomotive was not high enough resolution to use on a four by eight-foot size mural. A new high-resolution image drawing was created from the old scale drawing. One of the challenges of redrawing the old locomotive was the cow-catcher bars in front of the engine. Each bar is in a different

location and is at a different angle. The color scheme for the locomotive was a typical one used in the 1857 era.

When the old steam locomotive was redrawn, one interesting question was whether or not there should be a window in the front of the locomotive cab. Because of the size of the smokestack and bell, it would have been very challenging for the engineer to see anything from a front window. The decision was made not to have a window in the front of the cab.

For the coal mining mural, the Fairbury Echoes Museum had an extremely rare photograph of early Fairbury coal miners. A high-resolution scan of this photograph was utilized to create this mural. A high-resolution modern map of Fairbury was drawn to show the location of the three principal coal mines. Because many people had never seen what coal looks like, a contemporary photo of a pile of coal was also included on the mural.

Francis Townsend was born and raised in Fairbury. He went on to lead a national movement for an old-age pension. It is believed his campaign put political pressure on President Roosevelt to adopt the Social Security system we still have today.

The cornerstone idea of Townsend was that because of the Industrial Revolution; it was no longer necessary for children or the elderly to work. This idea was well illustrated in a diagram in a book about the Townsend Movement. The lettering in the chart was replaced with high-resolution words so they would look correct on a large mural. Because the Townsend Movement had millions of members, you can still buy postcards and other items on eBay. For the mural, some Townsend Movement items were purchased from eBay. These eBay items were then scanned at high resolution for the murals.

For the Fairbury Fair and race track mural, a high-resolution image of the track and grandstands from 1922 was used. A 1911 Sanborn insurance map image of the track and fairground was redrawn in high-resolution format.

John Virgin was selected to represent Fairbury's rich agricultural history. He fought in the Civil War with Fairbury's 3rd Cavalry Company K. After the war, he became an importer of huge French draft horses called Percherons. He was active in the Fairbury Fair, the Illinois State Fair, and was appointed by the Governor to design the 1893 Chicago World's Fair agricultural exhibit.

He designed a unique building for his stables, called the Horse Palace. The only images of his Horse Palace were not good enough quality for a mural. Board by board, his Horse Palace was carefully redrawn using a computer drafting program. Carl Borngasser provided an original letterhead for John Virgin's business from the 1880s. The lettering on the letterhead was painstakingly redrawn to high resolution for the mural.

The Prairie Lands Foundation covered the material costs for this mural project. The City of Fairbury provided a beautiful new curved sidewalk to view the murals. Volunteers donated all the labor required to prepare the digital images and to construct the murals.

Many Fairbury citizens and their children have studied these murals. Many visitors to Fairbury also stop by and review all the murals. They do a great job of bringing Fairbury's rich history back to life.